

By Dan Robinson

At a U.S. congressional hearing Thursday, witnesses challenged the testimony of a U.S. official who was defending a decision to remove Vietnam from a list of countries failing to do enough to promote religious freedom. VOA congressional correspondent Dan Robinson reports from Capitol Hill.

In a move that angered some members of Congress and was criticized by human rights groups, the State Department in late 2006 removed Vietnam from a list of Countries of Particular Concern (CPC) believed to be severe violators of religious freedom.

Whether Vietnam should remain off that list is a decision U.S. officials will have to make, and was also the focus of a congressional hearing on Capitol Hill.

U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom, John Hanford, points to significant progress by the government of Vietnam in addressing key religious freedom concerns.

Noting that to be on the list a government must be found to be engaging or tolerating systematic, ongoing egregious violations, Hanford says legal changes implemented by Hanoi banned such things as forced renunciations of faith, and granted clear legal rights for freedom of religious belief and practice. "I would say that what we have seen occur in Vietnam is the biggest turnaround that I have seen a sitting government make in a two year period on religious freedom," he said.

But Hanford's remarks, which also attributed progress by Hanoi to what he called strong diplomatic engagement by the U.S., were challenged by other witnesses.

Leonard Leo of the U. S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, says what he calls serious and systematic problems continue to darken the religious freedom picture in Vietnam.

These include abuses by provincial authorities; long delays in processing religious group applications for legal recognition; confiscations of land of ethnic minority Protestants and in some areas training of provincial officials to deny medical, educational and other services to religious families or families of converts.

At the core of problems, Leo says Buddhist groups such as the United Buddhist Church of Vietnam and others are still viewed by the government as a threat to its power. "There is no religious freedom if there is control. What Vietnam essentially has done is, it has begrudgingly allowed religious worship but it has built a very large fence around it, an effort to ensure that it does not grow, and in an effort to make sure that the religions that are present in Vietnam are doing things that the government wants them to do," he said.

Amnesty International representative T. Kumar asserts Vietnam's government continues to use criminal laws to harass believers, particularly those in ethnic minority groups. "Even though they have these regulations, we have documented reports that still forced renunciation is going on, in the Montagnard areas, still people have been arrested, short-term detentions, harassment and other issues, and people are still fleeing to neighboring Cambodia," he said.

Nguyen Dinh Thang of the Vietnamese-American organization Boat People SOS, asserts that little has changed in the Vietnam government's attitude toward religious freedom. "Before the CPC designation Vietnam closed down over four-thousand protestant churches, mainly in the central highlands and the northwest highlands. After the ordinance was promulgated so far only about two dozen religious organizations or churches have benefited from that ordinance. The Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam, prior to the [CPC] designation they were outlawed, now they continue to be outlawed. The entire leadership was under temple arrest, now they remain under temple arrest. There is no change. And the catholic church, prior [to CPC] designation Father Ly was in prison, now he is still in prison," he said.

In other testimony, Chris Seiple of the Institute for Global Engagement supported Ambassador Hanford's view of progress, citing among other things the cessation of forced renunciation, and increasing registration of churches. "There are significant and ongoing challenges to be sure, but I think we are in the beginning of a significant and strategic paradigm shift. We are in the initial stages, but we have to take the long view," he said.

Democratic congresswoman Loretta Sanchez, who chaired the hearing, used her remarks to draw attention to Father Nguyen Van Ly, the noted dissident and Roman Catholic priest imprisoned again last March, along with the recent arrests of two Vietnamese-American democracy activists: "I want the government of Vietnam to know that we will continue to fight for the release of our U.S. citizens, as well as for other dissidents currently being imprisoned in Vietnam," she said.

Sanchez says she hopes the U.S. Senate acts on legislation called the Vietnam Human Rights Act, approved by the House of Representatives last September.

Among other things, it would prohibit any increase in non-humanitarian aid to Vietnam beyond 2007 levels unless it shows substantial progress toward releasing political and religious prisoners and solidifying religious freedom.

The sponsor of the legislation, Republican congressman Chris Smith, told VOA Thursday he still hopes the Senate will act on the measure which also supports democracy programs for Vietnam, and contains funds to help the U.S.-government funded Radio Free Asia overcome Vietnamese government jamming of its transmissions.